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The Politics and Policy of HBO's The Wire

In this class, we will watch all five seasons of HBO's award-winning *The Wire* from the perspective of social scientists interested in politics, policy, and human behavior. Set in declining Baltimore, *The Wire* provides the perfect lens with which to study a rich set of social scientific issues, concepts, and questions. We will explore a wide variety of interdisciplinary topics, including the war on drugs, urban elections, bureaucracy, rational choice theory, and union politics.

Most days on the syllabus combine episodes with readings. Because the issues explored in this course stretch across a number of the social sciences, our interdisciplinary readings come from academic journals and books in political science, sociology, and economics. The readings and the episodes will interact with one another: episodes will illustrate ideas from the literature, and the significance of show scenes becomes clearer when we use the readings' social science analyses.

Class preparation, participation, and quizzes

This is not a traditional lecture course. While we will do some lecturing to introduce social science concepts, the class will be unusually interactive for a large lecture. We will expect you all to come to class ready and eager to discuss both the episodes and the readings in large and small groups. In particular, Professors Glick and Einstein will frequently break the class down into smaller groups to facilitate seminar-style discussions normally absent from lecture classes.

It is therefore imperative that you keep up with the readings and the episodes. There is no point in being in the class if you plan on watching the show in marathons before exams: the show is integral to the class sessions. To ensure that everyone is prepared to participate, we will have **frequent tiny episode/reading quizzes at the beginning of class**. These quizzes will be very short and easy. If you watched the assigned episodes and got the basic idea of the readings, you will do well. If not, you will not. We will literally flip a coin at the beginning of class to determine if there is a quiz. We will drop your worst quiz from your semester quiz grade. Please note that if you only read HBO's plot summaries, you will not do well on some episode/reading quizzes. While these

summaries can helpfully jog your memory, they are not a substitute for watching assigned episodes.

Content Disclaimer

The Wire contains a variety of content that may be offensive to some students. The dialogue contains considerable profanity and racial slurs. In addition, the show frequently depicts overt drug use, “strong sexual content” (to borrow from the ratings system), and graphic violence. While these scenes are not terribly explicit by modern movie standards, we want to ensure that you have proper expectations about the show’s content.

“Books” for Purchase:

There are no books for this class. All readings will be on Blackboard.

You are responsible for acquiring all of the episodes of the Wire. You can buy the box set online at websites like Amazon.com or use an HBO Go subscription

Assignments:

There will be one midterm exam and a final exam. Both will be closed-book/note and designed to test both your understanding of basics and your ability to put course ideas together in interesting ways.

In addition, there will be a major research project, culminating in a 12-15+ page paper, that will constitute a large portion of your final grade. This project—which can be done in groups of up to four—will be an in-depth, case study analysis that applies the themes of the course to the city of Boston. Student groups will select a topic from the course and use social science research methods to explore that issue in the city of Boston. These methods can take a variety of forms, including observation analysis, interviews, quantitative analysis, and archival research. To ensure that students have sufficient guidance in their selection of topic and method, student groups will be assigned either Professor Einstein or Professor Glick at the start of the semester as a project adviser. You are expected to meet regularly with your adviser to discuss choosing a topic, project design, and structuring your final paper. Because these regular meetings will ensure the receipt of frequent instructor feedback, we expect papers to represent a polished, written description of a well-executed social science research design. We will also be discussing social science methodology and potential data sources during class lectures.

- **Quizzes and Participation 15%**

- Midterm Exam: 25%
- Final Exam: 30%
- Research project 30%

TF Meeting(s): You will NOT have weekly discussion sections. You will, however, meet at least once with the TF to discuss and “workshop” your research paper.

Grades for Written Work and Exams: For written work, the A range will comprise only work which features strikingly original thinking and/or argumentation, expressed in clear, cogent, error-free writing. Only students that go well beyond class materials and discussions (in thought, not extra research) will be considered for an A grade. Papers and examinations in the B range exhibit mastery of the course materials and discussions, expressed in clear, cogent, error-free writing. Papers and examinations in the C range exhibit inadequate understanding of the course materials and discussions and/or deficient, error-plagued writing. Papers and examinations in the D range exhibit wholly inadequate understanding of the course materials combined with deficient, error-plagued writing. Hopefully the D range and worse will not be an issue. Pluses, minuses, or flat grades within any of these ranges reflect the instructors’ judgment of the merits of the paper or examination relative to other papers in the same range. All late assignments will be reduced 1/3 of a grade for every day they are late. Students may appeal grades they feel they received in error but we reserve the right to increase or decrease their grade upon reconsideration.

Other Practical Matters:

Email: The most efficient way to reach us is via email. No promises, but we will try to respond quickly. If you write and don’t hear back in 24 hours, please write again. Please try to CC both of us on emails unless there are reasons not to.

1. 9-2 Introduction: (Course overview, Wire overview, Thinking like a social scientist).
 - a. Do the “Weapons-Harmless” Implicit Association Test:
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>
 - b. Watch Episode 1 (Season 1)

Season One

2. 9-4 Race in American Cities

- a. Jennifer L. Doleac and Luke C.D. Stein. "The Visible Hand: Race and Online Market Outcomes."
 - b. Episodes 2-3
- 3. 9-9 War on Drugs and Data: Thinking Like a Social Scientist I
 - a. Katherine Beckett, Kris Nyrop, Lori Pfingst. 2006. "Race, Drugs, and Policing: Understanding Disparities in Drug Delivery Arrests." *Criminology* 44(1): 105-136
 - b. Michael Adams. "The Dead Grandmother/Exam Syndrome and the Potential Downfall of American Society."
<http://www.easternct.edu/~adams/Resources/Grannies.pdf>
 - c. Episodes 4-6
- 4. 9-11 Self-interest and Incentives: Thinking Like a Social Scientist II,
 - a. Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics*, (2012) Chapter 2, Incentives Matter
 - b. Michael Lewis, "If Only I had the Nerve," *ESPN the Magazine*,
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3641375>
 - c. Episodes 7-8
- 5. 9-16 Incentives and Principal Agent Problems: What Bureaucracies, Avon Barksdale, The Financial Crisis, and the Health Care Individual Mandate Have in Common
 - a. Episodes 9-11
 - b. Charles Wheelan, *Naked Economics*, (2012) Chapter 5, The Economics of Information
 - c. Michael Lewis. "The End." *Portfolio Magazine*. December 2008
- 6. 9-18 Deindustrialization, White Flight
 - a. Episodes 12-13
 - b. Douglas W. Rae. *City*, Chapter 8

Season Two

- 7. 9-23 Decline of Unions and Contemporary Union Politics
 - a. Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue*, Chapter 2

- b. Jonathan Cohn, "Happy Labor Day. Are Unions Dead? An interview with Rich Yeselson, labor strategist and expert," *The New Republic*, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119272/labor-day-are-unions-dead-interview-rich-yeselson>
 - c. Season 2 Episodes 1-3

- 8. 9-25 Rosh Hashanah

- 9. 9-30 Historical Origins of Urban-Suburban Divide
 - a. Clayton Nall, "The Political Consequences of Spatial Policies": <http://web.stanford.edu/~nall/docs/nall--ident9.6.pdf>
 - b. Episodes 4-9 (this comprises a one week period without class)

- 10. 10-2 Federalism and Inter-agency Coordination
 - a. Peterson. "Who Should Do What? Divided Responsibility in the Federal System." *The Brookings Review* 13(2): 1-6, BB.
 - b. Episodes 10-12

Season 3

- 11. 10-7 Federalism. Congress in the Classroom Visitors.
 - a. Phillip Wallach. "Washington's Marijuana Legalization <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2014/08/25%20washington%20marijuana%20legalization%20knowledge%20experiment%20wallach/cepmmjwallach.pdf>
 - b. Episodes 1-3

- 12. 10-9 Neighborhoods, Incarceration, and the Cycle of Poverty
 - a. Devah Pager. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology*. 108(5): 937-75.
 - b. Emily Badger, "What Your your First Grade Life Says About the Rest of it," *The Washington Post* <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/08/29/what-your-1st-grade-life-says-about-the-rest-of-it/>

- c. Episodes 4-5
- 13. 10-14 No class “Monday”
- 14. 10-16: **Midterm**
- 15. 10-21 10-14 Local Politicians and the Allocation of Resources
 - a. Paul Peterson, *City Limits*, Chapter 3
 - b. Episodes 6-9
- 16. 10-23 Norms and Unwritten Rules
 - a. Robert Ellickson, *Order Without Law, 1991* (excerpts)
 - b. Lisa Bernstein, “Opting out of the Legal System: Extralegal Contractual Relations in the Diamond Industry,” *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 1992 – Read to Page 135 then skim from 135 to the end
 - c. Episodes 9-10
- 17. 10-28 Statistics, Implementation, and Measurement: Math and Policy.
 - a. Charlie Wheelan (2013), *Naked Statistics*, Chapter 7 “Garbage in, Garbage Out,” WW. Norton
 - b. <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-crimestats-lapd-20140810-story.html#page=1>
 - c. Episodes 11-12

Season 4

- 18. 10-30 Peer/Neighborhood Effects
 - a. Episodes 1-3
 - b. Bruce Sacerdote, Peer Effects With Random Assignment: Results for Dartmouth Roommates,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2001
- 19. 11-4 School Policy and Inequality – Local Control and Obstacles to Change
 - a. San Antonio v. Rodriguez (1973)
 - b. Episodes 4-6

20. 11-6 Evaluating Schools and Teachers

- a. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2010/11/17-evaluating-teachers>
- b. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/21/wrong-answer>
- c. Episodes 7-8

21. 11-11 Schools and Mobility. Visiting lecture from Mark Robertson, Project Director, Access to Opportunity. Center for Education Policy Research.

- a. David Leonhart, In Climbing Income Ladder, Location Matters, The New York Times, 7/22/13 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/business/in-climbing-income-ladder-location-matters.html>
- b. Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, the Missing “One Offs”: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students, NBER Working Paper, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18586>
- c. Episodes 9-11

22. 11-13 Can We Desegregate? The Political and Social Effects of Housing Decisions

- a. Ryan Enos. “What the Demolition of Public Housing Teaches Us About the Impact of Racial Threat on Political Behavior.” *American Journal of Political Science*
- b. Episodes 12-13

Season 5

23. 11-18 Universities and Urban Policy: The Case of BU

- a. *Boston Globe* series on student housing: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/specials/shadow-campus>
- b. *Boston Globe* article on cycling: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/08/01/bicycle-advocates-seek-safety-changes-commonwealth-avenue/fMDP2S2Y057kaCIEeO3txN/story.html>
- c. Episodes 1-3

24. 11-20 Student paper workshop

- a. Come prepared with an outline
- b. Episodes 4-5

25. 11-25 Media

- a. Marcus Prior, "News vs. Entertainment, How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout," *The American Journal of Political Science*, Vol 4, No. 3, 2005
 - b. Episodes 4-6
26. 12-2 Visiting Lecture from Dean Elmore (Dean of Undergraduate Students, Boston University).
- a. Episodes 7-8
27. 12-4 Motivated Reasoning
- a. Episode 9
28. 12-10 Wrap-Up
- a. Episode 10